

God-Likeness in Plato's Theaetetus and in Plotinus

Ὁμοίωσις θεῷ in Plato and in Plotinus

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The interlude in the *Theaetetus* was a seminal text for Plotinus, who endorsed both Socrates' conception of the ideal of god-likeness (ὁμοίωσις θεῷ) and his claim that evil would “inevitably haunt mortal nature.” (176a7-8) However, in so far as the interlude raised more questions than could be addressed in what would become ten Stephanus pages, Plotinus reinterpreted the Socratic claims and integrated them in the framework of his emanative ontology. The god to whom we are to make ourselves “like” became the hypostasis Intellect and the archetypes of virtue therein; virtue became the state of embodied human souls who activate the traces of the Forms within themselves; and contemplation became the focus of the best life for a human being to lead. As for the claim that evil would forever stalk human nature, which Socrates had left vague and unsupported, it led Plotinus to formulate a highly complex theory of matter as metaphysical evil and indirect source of moral evil. Plotinus' conception of both virtue and vice, it will be argued, is a form of moral realism *avant la lettre*.

The digression in the *Theaetetus* (172c1-177b8) has not always found favour with philosophers. In antiquity the concept of ὁμοίωσις θεῷ, which Socrates there presents as the goal of the moral life, elicited but scant response from Plato's immediate successors in the Academy. It was not until the end of the first century B.C., when Eudorus of Alexandria revived the theme by integrating in it some Pythagorean elements, that the ideal of assimilation to the divine became a point of reference in the ethical discussions of the Platonists.¹ In modern times, it long seemed as if Gilbert Ryle had spoken for most readers of the dialogue when, in 1966, he dismissed the digression as “long and philosophically quite pointless.”² The flurry of articles published since then has compensated for the neglect from which these particular pages had suffered, and questions pertaining to the tone, content, logic and overall lesson of the digression have now received ὀr fair share of philosophical attention.³

This is as it should be, for the passage has considerable historical and philosophical significance. Considered historically, the ideal of *homoiōsis theōi*, after a slow start, enjoyed a long

¹ A long-neglected figure, Eudorus is the object of a detailed study by John Dillon, *The Middle Platonists: 80 B.C. to A.D. 220*, pp. 114-135, 2nd ed. revised (1st ed. 1977). Cf. also Bonazzi 2007.

² Ryle (1966:158).

³ The bibliography on the digression has grown very large in the last fifty years. Since my main purpose in this essay is to analyse the digression as a foundational text for Plotinus' ethics, I do not engage with the various interpretations of which it has lately been the object.

and illustrious *nachleben* amongst the Platonists, from Eudorus and Philo to Plotinus, Iamblichus, Boethius and the later Western tradition. Considered philosophically, the digression is one of the earliest attempts to deal with a problem that has continued to challenge moral philosophers ever since, namely moral relativism, and we must note Plato's prescience in having Socrates remark to Theodorus that what had begun as a mere interlude soon turned out to be "a greater discussion emerging from the lesser one." (172c1)⁴

Of all the Platonists and Neoplatonists who have dealt with the notion of *homoiōsis theōi*, none has done so as deftly and as comprehensively as Plotinus, who made it the lynchpin of his ethics. He opened his tractate *On Virtues* (I 2 [19]) with a critical analysis of the main points of the Platonic passage, corrected the argument where he thought it needed correcting and extended its scope so as to integrate the ideal of assimilation to the divine into the framework of his own ontology. This enabled him, in turn, to explain how *homoiōsis theōi* plays a key role, not only in the best human life, which is that of the σπουδαῖος (the man of high virtue) described in tractate I 4 [46] (*On Well-Being*) who practises the purificatory virtues, but also, to a more modest extent, in the "second best" human life, which is that of the common man capable of cultivating the civic virtues. In tractates II 4 [12] and I 8 [51] Plotinus turned to the concept of evil, which Socrates had described as the contrary (ὑπεναντίον, 176a6) of the good. The complex argument that he mounted in those tractates to show that evil, although "opposed to the things which in the full and proper sense exist", nonetheless has "a certain sort of existence" (II 4 [12] 16.2-3) proved highly influential on both his Neoplatonic successors and the Church Fathers. Taken together, Plotinus' account of the norms that inform a virtuous human life and his identification of evil with matter present features that contemporary philosophers would recognise as characteristic of "moral realism".

To substantiate this claim, I shall adopt the following strategy. After some brief introductory remarks on the nature of moral realism, I shall turn to an examination of the salient points of the digression with a view to identifying some of the difficulties that it would be likely to present for a later Platonist such as Plotinus. To justify my description of Plotinus as a moral realist *avant le lettre*,⁵ I

⁴ Modern echoes of Plato's high claim for the interlude include Cornford (1935:89), who writes: "This is no mere digression" and Burnyeat (1990:35-36), according to whom the purpose of the interlude is "To make sure that we do not take the issue [of what is worthwhile and important to know] lightly, Plato put the full power of his rhetoric into an extreme expression of his own vision of the human condition."

⁵ In so far as this essay is premised on the view that some philosophical problems are trans-historical, it inevitably features a number of anachronistic descriptors that would be out of place in a purely exegetical piece. Neither Plato nor Plotinus would have known what the label "ontological realism about values" refers to, neither would they have had any use for the distinction between "prudential" and "moral" or indeed the opposition between "moral autonomy" and "moral heteronomy" which will feature later in this essay. And if the Platonic Socrates regards Protagoras' theory of *homo mensura* as a challenge to his own view that ethical norms are absolute and

shall then outline the reasons that prompted him to make the Forms in Intellect the archetypes of the virtues, and Intellect itself the goal of *homoiōsis theōi*. Finally, I shall turn to the account of evil in the *Enneads* with a view to showing that in refusing to conceive evil merely as a privation of goodness, Plotinus ascribed to it a modicum of ontological density by describing it as a necessary presence in the world of sense.

1. *Moral realism: introductory remarks*

“Moral realism” is a label under which modern philosophers classify a range of ethical theories whose common denominator is the conviction that moral claims (or judgments) are grounded in states of affairs which exist independently of the claims themselves and are accessible to human cognition. Moral realists or cognitivists, as they are also called, are committed, therefore, to the thesis that moral claims (or judgments) are objective and truth-evaluable, and that the state of mind of those who make them is one of belief (or knowledge).⁶

It is not uncommon for modern moral realists to seek inspiration in ancient theories of ethics. Those who do so mostly turn to Aristotle, whose conception of human nature arguably puts clear constraints on the kind of virtues - ethical and intellectual - that can be taken to be constitutive of the best life for a human being to lead. Other moral realists favour a return to Plato for the soundest way to ground moral obligation or virtue. Unsurprisingly, these have been fewer in number given the heavy ontological commitments required by the Platonic approach and the misgivings that contemporary philosophers still harbour about metaphysics in general and Platonic ontology in particular. There have been, however, moral theorists such as Iris Murdoch and, more recently, John Rist and Sophie Grace Chappell, to argue that a careful reading of the dialogues would take us, not indeed all the way, but a long way towards finding in Plato a metaphysical justification “not merely [for] the existence of objective moral truths, but our *obligation* to act in accordance to them.” (Rist)⁷ In this essay, I shall use the Platonic approach to moral realism, not indeed for defending it as a meta-ethical theory,⁸ but as a heuristic device to interpret Plotinus’ conception of good and evil.

objective, he could not have been familiar with any of the modern non-cognitivist theories evolved in opposition to “moral realism” in its ancient or modern form.

⁶ Moral realists or cognitivists define themselves in opposition to non-cognitivists, such as Stevenson, Ayer, Hare, Mackie, Blackburn, Gibbard *et al.*, all of whom argue that moral judgments express non-cognitive attitudes such as emotions of approval or disapproval, commitments of a practical nature or acceptance of particular systems of norms.

⁷ Rist (2012:265), my emphasis. See also Rist (2002) and Chappell (2014a and b). For an earlier defense of a Platonistic approach to ethics, cf. Murdoch (1970, 1977 and 1993a).

⁸ For a critique of Rist’s meta-ethical interpretation of a range of Platonic dialogues, see Barney (1998).

2. *Homoiōsis theōi* in the *Theaetetus*

Plato uses *homoiōsis* sparingly and almost always in a commendatory sense, to refer to a process purposefully undertaken by human beings to make themselves, so far as possible, “like” an entity that is both different from, and superior to, themselves.⁹ In the digression of the *Theaetetus* the word refers to a protracted effort (τὸ ἐπιτηδεύεον, 176b5-6) on the part of someone who has already embarked on the way to wisdom and virtue, to get as close to the perfection of the divine as is possible for an embodied being to be. Platonic *homoiōsis*, therefore, is aspirational in meaning. As such, it is to be distinguished from μίμησις, a concept to which it bears a close but misleading resemblance. In the dialogues *mimēsis* almost always denotes a turn to the inferior; it involves attentiveness to what does not merit attention and mostly consists in the making (or enjoyment) of imitations of what is not worthy to be imitated. Rather than lifting the likeness-maker (or user) to a higher ontological plane, it anchors him in the here and now of the world of shadows and appearances. *Mimēsis*, as Plato conceived it, keeps the prisoners bound in the darkness of the cave and confines them to the lowest cognitive section of the Divided Line (509e-510a).¹⁰ It is the natural cognitive level of the Sophist.

The introduction of the concept of god-likeness (*homoiōsis theōi*) as the ultimate norm that is to guide human life makes the interlude in the *Theaetetus* a seminal text for the study of ancient forms of ethical realism. In so far as the digression is taken over by Socrates’ claim that moral values cannot be at the mercy of changing circumstances or be subject to the demands of expediency, it highlights Plato’s lifelong preoccupations with the foundations of morality. Thematically, it is close to the *Euthyphro*, where Socrates is made to draw a contrast between questions of measurement, where disagreements are easily settled by appeal to evidence, and questions of value, where there is no such obvious way forward:

“... about what would a disagreement be, which we could not settle and which would cause us to be enemies and be angry with each other? Perhaps you cannot give an answer offhand; but let me suggest it. Is it not about right and wrong, and noble and disgraceful, and good and bad? Are not these the questions about which you and I and other people become enemies, when we do become enemies, because we differ about them and cannot reach any satisfactory agreement? (7c8-d6, trans. Fowler)”

In the interlude in the *Theaetetus*, as will now be seen, Plato’s interest lies less in the nature of moral debates than in the ontology of moral values. Although Socrates’ remarks on the issue are

⁹ The only exception to this semantic generalisation that I am aware of is at *Laws* V, 728b4, where it is said that the greatest judgment upon an evil-doer is to grow like (τὸ ὁμοιοῦσθαι) those who are wicked.

¹⁰ It is worth noting that at 510e1-511a2 shadows, reflections in water and images are mentioned in a more positive manner: when they are recognised for what they are, namely mere semblance, they can be used as graphic aids through which geometers, two levels up the line, seek to “see” such geometrical concepts as “the diagonal itself” or “the square itself”. On the issue of the usefulness of images in trying to look in the eye of the sun, see also *Laws* X, 897d8-e2.

confined to what he calls a digression (πάρεργον, 177b8), the fact that they are made in the context of a search for a definition of knowledge invites us to address the question as to whether moral values can be known. In the second attempted definition, Socrates subjects Protagoras' theory of *homo mensura*¹¹ to probing criticisms. Having led Theodorus, who had been speaking on Protagoras' behalf, to concede that the theory is self-defeating, Socrates gets him to agree to a toned-down version of it and to admit that there are occasions on which experts are best placed to make authoritative pronouncements. Not even the staunchest of Protagoreans, Socrates explains, would deny that in matters of bodily health and political advantage experts are best consulted and their advice followed. Generalising the point, he concludes that, *pace* Protagoras, human beings all equate wisdom with "true thinking" (ἀληθῆ διάνοιαν, 170b8) and ignorance with "false [opinion]" (ψευδῆ, 170c4), and that they follow the advice of those experts and teachers whose wisdom and knowledge they trust (170a6-b10). The undeniable examples of trust that Socrates invokes in support of his claim highlight the role that truth, knowledge and wisdom play in everyday life.

Socrates' next question introduces the main point of the digression: does the domain of values, in which conflicts do appear irresolvable, provide Protagoras' theory with a field of application, however limited? Are there, he asks, experts and teachers to whom people can confidently turn in the hope of settling their worries and disagreements over moral and religious values? More pointedly even than he does in the *Euthyphro*, Socrates replies that most people would deny that moral and religious values have an ontological status of their own, which lifts them above the fluctuating opinions of the community in which they are held:

"It is in those other questions I am talking about - just and unjust, religious and irreligious - that men are ready to insist that no one of these things has by nature a being of its own; in respect of these, they say, *what seems to people collectively to be so is true, at the time when it seems that way and for just as long as it so seems.* (*Theaet.*, 172b2-6)"¹²

Relativism so defined is a theory that the Platonic Socrates - or indeed any Platonist - would reject on the ground that it carries unacceptable sceptical implications. A natural step for Socrates to take at this point, therefore, would be to seek to remove moral and religious values from the domain of "what seems" and to anchor them in the realm of "what is." But that is not a step that he takes straight away. Rather than confronting the issue head on, he proceeds obliquely and begins by drawing a

¹¹ "Man is the measure of all things: of the things which are, that they are, and of the things which are not, that they are not", 152a2-4.

¹² 172.b.2-6 ἐν τοῖς δίκαιοις καὶ ἀδίκτοις καὶ ὁσίοις καὶ ἀνοσίοις, ἐθέλουσιν ἰσχυρίζεσθαι ὡς οὐκ ἔστι φύσει αὐτῶν οὐδὲν οὐσίαν ἑαυτοῦ ἔχον, ἀλλὰ τὸ κοινῇ δόξαν τοῦτο γίνεται ἀληθὲς τότε, ὅταν δόξη καὶ ὅσον ἂν δοκῇ χρόνον. All quotations from the *Theaetetus* are in Levett's translation, with occasional modifications, flagged as such.

contrast between lawyers and politicians, on the one hand, and philosophers, on the other. So forcefully drawn is the contrast that some readers of the dialogue have interpreted the digression of which it forms a large part as an indictment of the judicial system that would soon condemn Socrates to death on grounds of impiety.¹³ While there is some truth in this view, it is not the whole truth. If it were, Plotinus, whose interest in the life and personality of Socrates was minimal, would not have engaged so closely with the digression.

Lawyers and politicians, practical men all of them, spend their life busying themselves in the public arena. Obsessed with worldly success and lacking in concern for the justice of the cause they are defending in the law courts or the righteousness of the measures they promote in the assembly, they readily tailor their speeches to conform to whatever values jury or demos hold at the time. They may well glory in being reproached for their shrewdness and unscrupulousness (συγχωρεῖν δεινῷ ὑπὸ πανουργίας εἶναι, 176d2-3),¹⁴ but the truth of the matter is that their mind is “warped” (οὐκ ὀρθοί, 173a3) and that they are slaves, slaves to the clepsydra, to the shifting values of the demos, and to the argument that they must mount in the hope of securing the verdict they seek. Their ignorance of the wages of injustice will condemn them, in both this life and the thereafter, to the godless and unhappy company of those as unjust as themselves.

True philosophers, by contrast, who have “been brought up in freedom and leisure” (175e1) and devote themselves to abstract studies, “geometrising upon earth” and “astronomising in the heavens” (173e5-6), are free from the constraints that public affairs impose upon men of action. Masters of their own thoughts, they can develop their arguments at leisure (172e-173c). Their unworldliness is such that they are unaware, not only of what takes place in the city or even in their neighbourhood, but also of what makes their next-door neighbour the singular person that he is (174b2). In the body they may well be, but the truth is that they are, so to speak, on a visit to the city.

If philosophers are seemingly indifferent to what lies at their feet, it is because their sole interest is in “tracking down by every path the whole nature of everything that is, each in its entirety”.¹⁵ Unlike lawyers and politicians, whose sole interest is in the here and now, philosophers engage in the “... examination of justice and injustice themselves – what they are, and how they differ from everything

¹³ See, e.g., Nails (2006:8-9).

¹⁴ Plato often loads *deinos* with negative connotations; see, for instance, *Phaedrus* 229d4.

¹⁵ πᾶσαν πάντῃ φύσιν ἐρευνωμένη τῶν ὄντων ἐκάστου ὅλου, 173e6-174a1, trans. Levett modified.

else and from each other”¹⁶. Brushing aside such questions as “is the king happy?” or is X “a man of property?” philosophers engage in “enquiries into kingship, and into human happiness and misery in general – what these two things are, and what, for a human being, is the proper method by which the one can be obtained and the other avoided”¹⁷ (175c4-8).

These passages, which have Plato highlight the philosopher’s theoretical interest in universal concepts such as justice and injustice, introduce the main claim of the digression: *pace* Protagoras, moral values have a being of their own, independent of human whims and changing individual circumstances. They are absolute, hence objective. Before going further into the issue, however, we may note that Socrates’ contrast between otherworldly philosophers and self-serving men of action is so stark as to verge on the hyperbolic; not only does he ignore those who occupy the middle ground in the moral life, he contemptuously describes them as *banausoi* (artisans, people of low intelligence, 76c7).

(a) *First difficulty: the moral life of the many*

As expressed in these lines, the indifference displayed by the Platonic Socrates to the moral life of the many strikes a discordant note. Had he not, at the opening of the dialogue, professed to care for his compatriots (143d4-6)? Had he not in other dialogues often taken cobblers, builders, metal-workers and cowherds as stock examples in his discussions of the virtues?¹⁸ Had he not tried to dissuade Adeimantus from completely “writing off ordinary people” (τῶν πολλῶν κατηγόρει, VI 499d10-e1) as incapable of thinking?¹⁹ Unphilosophical though ordinary folks may be, Socrates in the *Apology* and the *Republic* had shown enough trust in their expertise (τὴν τέχνην) to seek them out (*Apology*, 22d6), and enough regard for their potential contribution to *Kallipolis* to make them the money-making class in it, responsible for generating wealth in, and for, the city. Lastly, it had been for their sake that philosophers had been sent back to the fray of politics to devise a moral code appropriate to their unsteady souls.

Far from being as marginal as it might appear at first sight, such unusual manifestation of high-handedness on Socrates’ part brings Plato’s concept of virtue to the fore. In the stark moral landscape of the digression it remains unclear, not only how “ordinary people” evolve the moral norms that guide their conduct, but also from which source they can obtain moral guidance when those best qualified to

¹⁶ ‘... εἰς σκέψιν αὐτῆς δικαιοσύνης τε καὶ ἀδικίας, τί τε ἐκάτερον αὐτοῖν καὶ τί τῶν πάντων ἢ ἀλλήλων διαφέρετον’, 175c2-3.

¹⁷ ‘... πέρι καὶ ἀνθρωπίνης ὅλως εὐδαιμονίας καὶ ἀθλιότητος ἐπὶ σκέψιν, ποῖω τέ τινα ἐστὸν καὶ τίνα τρόπον ἀνθρώπου φύσει προσήκει τὸ μὲν κτήσασθαι αὐτοῖν, τὸ δὲ ἀποφυγεῖν’, 175c5-8.

¹⁸ Cf., for instance, *Gorgias*, 491a7-8; cf. also Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, 1, x2, 37.

¹⁹ All translations of the *Republic* are in Rowe’s rendering.

give it remain aloof from practical affairs. Plato had not ignored the problem in his earlier teachings on virtue. In the *Phaedo*, he had distinguished two kinds of virtue, the one “purificatory” and practised by philosophers, the other “civic” and practised by the best of the many. Although he had disparagingly described the civic virtues as “simple-minded” (εὐήθη, 68e5) because practised “without philosophy or understanding” (ἄνευ φιλοσοφίας τε καὶ νοῦ, 82b2-3), the very fact that he had mentioned them showed that he recognised that “ordinary people” are capable of a level of virtue, however modest. In the *Republic* he had softened, but not retracted, the contrast drawn in the *Phaedo* between civic and purificatory virtues. Although claiming that “if someone truly has his mind on things as they really are, he will not have time to look down at the preoccupations of mere mortals,” (*Rep.* VI, 500b8-c2). Socrates had nonetheless made philosophers use their knowledge of the Forms “to produce such counterparts of temperance, justice, and all the virtues as can exist in the ordinary man”. In both the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*, therefore, ordinary folks are assumed to be capable of practising the virtues, albeit in a “heteronomous” manner.²⁰ Indeed, it is precisely because the philosophers of the *Republic* have educational responsibilities towards their weaker brethren that they are not given licence, as they appear to be in the *Theaetetus*, to ignore what lies at their feet.

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Returning to the digression, let us note that Theodorus, to judge by his bland reply to Socrates, had not fully understood the direction that the argument was taking: “If your words convinced everyone as they do me, there would be more peace and fewer evils amongst men.” Bland though the remark was, it elicited a response that would, after a gap of a few centuries, become one of the best-known passages in the corpus:

“But it is not possible, Theodorus, that evil should be destroyed – for there must always be something opposed to the good; nor is it possible that it should have its seat amongst the gods. But it must inevitably haunt human life, and prowl about this earth. This is why a man should make all haste to escape from earth to heaven; and escape means becoming as

²⁰ Kant’s contrast between autonomy and heteronomy, which figures prominently in his 1785 *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, 88-89 (Ak. 441) long post-dates Plato and is therefore used anachronistically here. I would argue, however, that the way in which the soldiers of Kallipolis practise courage is paradigmatically “heteronomous” in Kant’s terminology: “If the will seeks the law that is to determine it *anywhere else* than in the fitness of its maxims for its own making of universal law - if therefore in going beyond itself it seeks this law in the character of any of its objects - the result is always heteronomy” (trans. H.J. Paton). In so far as the soldiers of Kallipolis “should be persuaded (*peisthentes*) into taking up our laws as well as they possibly could, just like a dye” (430a2-3), it is clear that whenever they act courageously, it is not as a result of autonomously formulating a universalizable maxim, but of being trained so to act by other men, who know better than they do. In Plato’s plainer words, these soldiers do not practice their specific virtue “with philosophy and understanding” (*Phaedo*, 82b3). Socrates’ later definition of courage as “that sort of capacity to preserve, under all circumstances, the correct belief, as prescribed by law, about what is and is not to be feared” (430b3-5) confirms that the soldiers’ virtue is mostly a matter of training and obedience.

like god as possible; and a man becomes like god when he becomes just and pious, with understanding ... In god there is no sort of wrong whatsoever; he is supremely just, and the thing most like him is the man who has become as just as it lies in human nature to be. And it is here that we see whether a man is truly able, or truly a weakling and a nonentity; for it is the knowledge that this is so that constitutes genuine wisdom and virtue, while ignorance of this is manifest folly and wickedness.” (Trans. modified).²¹

The opposition between good or goodness (τὸ ἀγαθόν) and evil (τὰ κακὰ) that Socrates draws in these lines is no straightforward opposition; while the good is presented as a transcendent metaphysical reality, evils, here significantly put in the plural, are said to be an immanent and inevitable aspect of mortal nature. While the being of goodness is absolute, objective and accessible to those possessed of a philosophical nature, the being of evil is a feature of everyday experience, which manifests itself in the short-term and ill-conceived goals of those who court worldly success and live by the shifting values of whatever community they happen to be in at the time. Failing to raise their eyes above the here and now, they do not understand that god is the model, if not the source, of goodness insofar as he is supremely just and, by implication, pious (ὅσιος). The last lines of the passage further suggest that knowledge of the good is motivating in itself and that virtue, therefore, comes hand in hand with wisdom. Although there is a hint of a moral prescription (χρῆ, 176a8) in the claim that human beings should make haste to try and transcend their mortal nature, the prescriptive element is minimal, and the implication of the passage is that those who succeed in reaching out to an ontological level higher than their mortal nature do what they truly want. The main message of the lines, therefore, is characteristically Socratic: knowledge of the nature and standard of moral goodness is sufficient for virtue and the practice of the virtues “with understanding,” in turn, enables those who are philosophically disposed to make themselves as “like” the divine standard as is possible for a mortal being to be.

Lawyers and politicians, here assumed to be beyond the pale, are not offered either a reason for mending their baneful ways or, should they show an inkling of wanting to do so, any advice on the best way to proceed. All they get, a few lines later, is a warning, which comes as Socrates is rounding off

²¹ 176a5-c5: Ἀλλ’ οὐτ’ ἀπολέσθαι τὰ κακὰ δυνατόν, ὃ Θεόδωρε— ὑπεναντίον γάρ τι τῷ ἀγαθῷ ἀεὶ εἶναι ἀνάγκη—οὐτ’ ἐν θεοῖς αὐτὰ ἰδρῦσθαι, τὴν δὲ θνητὴν φύσιν καὶ τόνδε τὸν τόπον περιπολεῖ ἐξ ἀνάγκης. διὸ καὶ πειρᾶσθαι χρὴ ἐνθένδε ἐκεῖσε φεύγειν ὅτι τάχιστα. φυγὴ δὲ ὁμοίωσις θεῷ κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν· ὁμοίωσις δὲ δίκαιον καὶ ὅσιον μετὰ φρονήσεως γενέσθαι ... θεὸς οὐδαμῇ οὐδαμῶς ἄδικος, ἀλλ’ ὡς οἶόν τε δικαιοτάτος, καὶ οὐκ ἔστιν αὐτῷ ὁμοιότερον οὐδὲν ἢ ὃς ἂν ἡμῶν αὖ γένηται ὅτι δικαιοτάτος. περὶ τοῦτο καὶ ἡ ὡς ἀληθῶς δεινότης ἀνδρὸς καὶ οὐδενία τε καὶ ἀνανδρία. ἡ μὲν γὰρ τοῦτου γνῶσις σοφία καὶ ἀρετὴ ἀληθινή, ἡ δὲ ἄγνοια ἀμαθία καὶ κακία ἐναργής.

his critique of moral relativism. The warning takes the form of a prudential argument, in which the grim consequences of their debased way of life are spelled out:

“... there are two patterns set up in reality. One is divine and supremely happy; the other has nothing of god in it, and is the pattern of deepest unhappiness. This truth the evil doer does not see; blinded by folly and utter lack of understanding, he fails to perceive that the effect of his unjust practices is to make him grow more and more like the one, and less and less like the other. For this he pays the penalty of living the life that corresponds to the pattern he is coming to resemble. And if we tell him that, unless he is delivered of this ‘ability’ of his, when he dies the place that is pure of all evil will not receive him; that he will for ever go on living in this world a life after his own likeness.”²²

The version of moral realism outlined in those lines differs from the version given in the previous passage in one crucial respect: evil is now described as a pattern (παράδειγμα) “set up in reality.” Now referred to in the singular as a *paradeigma* on a par with the divine *paradeigma*, evil is no longer restricted to the mortal realm, but, so it seems at least, has been given the ontological status of a counterpart to the good. While wisdom comes to human beings through a process of assimilation to god, lack of understanding correspondingly makes the evil doer grow more and more like the godless, but nonetheless otherworldly, *paradeigma* that his conduct imitates.²³

(b) *Second difficulty: the ontological status of evil*

Is evil a pattern set up in reality or is it the ever-present evidence in the sublunary world of human weakness? If there can be no doubt that throughout the digression Socrates remains committed to a conception of the good as a real existent, his vacillations on the kind of reality that evil possesses should be noted. Do the above-quoted lines set evil alongside the good into the domain of “what is”? And if the object of the philosophers’ embrace, namely “what is, by itself, in each case”, turns out to be what Plato elsewhere calls the Forms, can it be inferred further, far more problematically, that such entities now include an otherworldly *paradeigma* of evil? Although a full treatment of these complex issues cannot be undertaken here, the remarks that follow will, it is hoped, sketch the Platonic background against which Plotinus would later develop his conception of the moral life.

²² 176e3-177a7: Παραδειγμάτων, ὃ φίλε, ἐν τῷ ὄντι ἐσώτων, τοῦ μὲν θείου εὐδαιμονεστάτου, τοῦ δὲ ἀθέου ἀθλιωτάτου, οὐχ ὁρῶντες ὅτι οὕτως ἔχει, ὑπὸ ἡλιθιότητός τε καὶ τῆς ἐσχάτης ἀνοίας λανθάνουσι τῷ μὲν ὁμοιοῦμενοι διὰ τὰς ἀδίκους πράξεις, τῷ δὲ ἀνομοιοῦμενοι. οὐ δὴ τίνουσι δίκην ζῶντες τὸν εἰκότα βίον ᾧ ὁμοιοῦνται· ἐὰν δ’ εἴπωμεν ὅτι, ἂν μὴ ἀπαλλαγῶσι τῆς δεινότητος, καὶ τελευτήσαντας αὐτοὺς ἐκεῖνος μὲν ὁ τῶν κακῶν καθαρὸς τόπος οὐ δέξεται, ἐνθάδε δὲ τὴν αὐτοῖς ὁμοιότητα τῆς διαγωγῆς αἰεὶ ἔξουσι, κακοὶ κακοῖς συνόντες.

²³ Rist does not appear to have realised the implications for his realist conception of the Good of this twist in Socrates’ flirtation with an other-worldly principle of evil. “negative Forms,” he writes of this passage, “are again ignored or shelved” (2012: 180). “Shelved” they may be, but they are not “ignored” in the digression.

Although the Forms are never mentioned by name in the dialogue, there are, even so, reasons to think that they might be alluded to in the digression. The most natural reading of such expressions as τῶν ὄντων ἕκαστος ὅλος (“the whole nature of everything that is,” 174a1), αὐτῆς δικαιοσύνης τε καὶ ἀδικίας (“justice and injustice themselves,” 175c2), and παραδειγμάτων ... ἐν τῷ ὄντι ἐστώτων (“patterns set up in reality,” 176e3) is to take them to refer to the Forms, as theorised in the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*. Socrates’ words to refer to the standard of goodness are the very same ones that he used in those dialogues to denote the Forms, namely τὸ ὄν/τὰ ὄντα and αὐτός followed by a noun, with or without an article.²⁴ So much might also be suggested by claims that Socrates makes in the digression when he criticizes Protagoras’ *homo mensura* principle as ontologically shallow or when he describes philosophers as devoting all their energy to the investigation of unchanging realities and/or abstract concepts.

The issue becomes highly problematical when, in the second of the two above-quoted passages, “the patterns (*paradeigmata*) set up in reality” turn out to comprise evil as well as the good. The possibility that Socrates might here be referring to evil as a metaphysical existent arguably receives further support in a later passage in the dialogue, when the unjust, the bad and the ugly are included in the list of objects that the philosopher’s soul considers “alone and through itself” (τὰ μὲν αὐτῇ δι’ αὐτῆς ἢ ψυχῇ ἐπισκοπεῖν, 185e6-7), that is, without the aid of the body. Taken together, the three passages raise a number of questions: Are the Forms being re-introduced in the dialogue through the backdoor of the digression? Could Plato, however fleetingly, have Socrates entertain the possibility that there is an other-worldly principle of evil? Or, more simply, had his conception of the Forms sufficiently evolved by then to consider them as general concepts or patterns, negative as well as positive? A glance at his use of *paradeigma* in other dialogues likely to be close in date to the *Theaetetus* may shed some light on these questions.

In those dialogues, *paradeigma* is used to denote metaphysical entities. But it does not do so unflinchingly or unproblematically. The exordium to *Timaeus*’ discourse features a distinction between two *paradeigmata* that could have guided the craftsman who made our world, one paradigm “which remains the same and unchanging” (29a) and one “that has come to be.” Although the craftsman turned to the eternal paradigm, that is, the Form of the World-Animal, it is suggested that he might very well have chosen the generated one. That particular claim raises a host of puzzles, chief amongst which is how, in the creationist context of the *Timaeus*, an empirical paradigm could have constituted a model for an as yet non-existent world.²⁵ The question is not resolved in the dialogue. The *Parmenides*, too,

²⁴ Cf., for instance, *Rep.* VII 537c3 and X 601b13. The expression τῶν ὄντων ἕκαστου replicates τῶν ὄντων ἕκαστος at *Phaedo* 66a2, where it points to the Forms.

²⁵ For a detailed and philosophically probing account of the alternative *paradeigmata*, cf. Broadie (2012:27-74).

features a curious use of *paradeigma*. At the beginning of the dialogue, the young Socrates, having been made to abandon his suggestion that Forms might be thoughts in our minds, puts forward the view that they “are like patterns set in nature (παραδείγματα ἐστάναι ἐν τῇ φύσει, 132d2), and other things resemble them and are likenesses; and this partaking of the Forms is, for the other things, simply being modelled on (ἐοικέναι, 132.d.2) them.”²⁶ The young Socrates is not given the opportunity of spelling out what he had meant by “in nature.” Could it have been the physical world? From the gloss that Parmenides puts on the expression, it would seem more likely that he took the expression to refer to “separate and independent entities” (εἶδη ὄντα αὐτὰ καθ’ αὐτὰ διορίζηται, 133.a.9), namely Forms. But then, as we know, Parmenides was out to trip up the young Socrates and the issue is never resolved.

The denotation of *paradeigma*, as used at *Theaetetus* 176e3, is as hard to pin down as it is in the *Timaeus* and the *Parmenides*. While Socrates’ claim that the *paradeigma* of “godless unhappiness” is “set in reality” suggests that he views it as a metaphysical entity, there are even so reasons to resist the suggestion.²⁷ First, this particular Socratic claim would directly conflict with the earlier description of *ta kaka* as confined to mortal nature. Second, the brief allusion to the afterlife contained in the digression sets up a contrast, not indeed of an earthly place with another earthly place, but of an otherworldly place with a place “here (ἐνθάδε, *ibid*, 177a5) on earth,” thereby returning to Socrates’ earlier suggestion that evil is a feature of mortal nature, as opposed to an otherworldly reality. Third, even if Plato in these few lines did entertain the possibility that evil is a metaphysical entity, it is not a possibility that he seems to have explored further in this or other dialogues.²⁸ Significantly, evil does not figure amongst the negative Forms posited in the *Sophist* (257b-258a).

(c) *Third difficulty: God’s justice and piety*

The last difficulty to consider in the interlude is Socrates’ ascription of virtue to god. This is so in view of the particular virtues - justice and piety - that he chooses in support of his claim. Take justice first. As theorised in the *Republic*, justice takes two forms. As a citizenly virtue, justice requires of each

²⁶ 132d1-2, trans. Gill and Ryan. Brisson 1999 hedges his bets when he skilfully renders the passage as: “... ces Formes sont comme des modèles qui subsistent dans leur nature”.

²⁷ As Sedley (2004: 79, n.40) writes: “My contention here is not that Plato definitely excludes bad Forms (...), but that there are understandable reasons for his striking reticence about them.”

²⁸ Admittedly, there are passages in the corpus in which Plato may be taken to countenance the possibility that there are Forms of negative objects. One such passage is in *Republic* V, 476 a5-7, where Socrates argues that a relation of opposition can only obtain between two things, each of which, taken separately, is one. “It’s the same story”, he continues, “with just and unjust, good and bad, and so on with *all the Forms* (πάντων τῶν εἰδῶν).” Since the issue is not explored further it is impossible to say whether *eidos* is here to be treated as the name of a Form or merely a class name without ontological density. Whether Plato meant to introduce negative Forms at this point is in any case doubtful since the analogy of the Sun, which he develops in the following book, restricts the Forms to objects that owe their existence to the Good.

member of *Kallipolis* that he promote the good of the whole of which he is a part by fulfilling his specific function; as a virtue internal to the just person, justice consists in a state of harmony between the parts of the soul. Neither of these two concepts would appear to fit the divine nature since it is a matter of definition that god is not part of the city and that he is immune to the emotions and impulses that call for rational control in human beings. As for piety (cf. ὁσιον), Socrates' indirect ascription of this virtue to god is even more puzzling since, as defined in the *Euthyphro*, piety regulates human attitudes and behaviour to the divine. Even if we hold with David Sedley that the god whom Socrates here presents as a model of goodness is "a depersonalised and transcendent principle of goodness,"²⁹ there is no ready way in which to make good this particular Socratic claim.

* *

To conclude: the digression in the *Theaetetus* raises a number of difficulties, chief among which is uncertainty over the role of transcendent realities or Forms in defining the moral life and the nature of evil. As argued above, Plato's doctrinal vacillations on these issues suggest that he found it difficult to defend the kind of moral realism to which he was committed in terms that would not include entities such as Forms, negative as well as positive. At this point the matter must rest since a fuller treatment of the problems would require a detailed analysis of several "late" dialogues, an undertaking that would far exceed the scope of this essay.

The story, however, did not end with Plato since later Platonists proved to be less tentative on those issues than he had been. The most insightful of them, Plotinus, for whom the digression was a seminal text, reconsidered the issues systematically and in depth in tractates I 2 [19] (*On Virtues*), II 4 [12] (*On Matter*) and I 8 [51] (*On What are Evils*). To these, I now turn, starting with tractate I 2 [19], which is wholly devoted to the definition of virtue.

3. *Homoiōsis theōi* in Plotinus

a. Virtues and Vices: *Ennead* I 2 [19] *On Virtues*

This tractate, the culmination of Plotinus' early reflections on virtue, is unusually analytical in tone and explicitly critical of Plato. It opens with a list of concerns that Plotinus has over Socrates' presentation of the ideal of *homoiōsis theōi*: (1) who is the god to whom we are to make ourselves like? Can a god be said to be virtuous? And, if it is agreed that the divine principle is above virtue, in what sense can virtue make us like it? (2) How, more generally, must we conceive the relation of likeness between

²⁹ Cf. Sedley (2004:79) and Burnyeat (1997a). Awareness of the problem involved in ascribing piety to the divine may have caused the usually scrupulous Jane Levett in this instance to translate *hosios* somewhat freely by "pure".

entities belonging to different ontological levels? (3) Which virtues must we cultivate in order to get as close to the divine as we can? Are they only the higher, purificatory, virtues or can the lower, civic, virtues, which Plato had mostly disparaged, contribute to bringing us close to the divine?

These were crucial questions for Plotinus, who shared Socrates' ideal of the moral life as a turn away from worldly concerns to cultivate the soul's aspiration to the divine.³⁰ But Socrates' remarks had been sketchy and rhetorical in tone. In tractate I 2 [19] Plotinus provided them with the robust philosophical justification that they needed if they were to convince and to motivate. Relying on his conception of the human soul as an emanant of Intellect, he glossed Socrates' "flight from here" as the detachment of the soul from the body, and *homoiōsis theōi* as her reversion to her emanating principle, Intellect. Through the practice of the virtues, both civic and purificatory, he explained, human souls can strike a balance between their responsibility to the body, whose life they are to sustain, and their higher goal, which is to nurture the divine element in themselves and, so doing, reach out to the principle from which they are descended. If Plotinus thus conceived of ethics as an offshoot of metaphysics, he nonetheless devoted considerable attention to specifically ethical issues. So doing, he drew attention to features of the interlude that have generally escaped the notice of later commentators. The remainder of this section is devoted to the details of his argument.

Plotinus' first concern was to identify the god to whom human souls should assimilate themselves. Could it be the World Soul? It cannot be, went his immediate answer, for the World-Soul, considered ontologically, is on a par with human souls. In so far as the World-Soul and embodied human souls all spring from Intellect and have the function of steering individual bodies - the cosmos in one case, human bodies in the other - they are partial (μερικοί, IV 3 [27] 5.18) manifestations of hypostatic Soul, whose form they share (ὁμοειδής, *ibid.* 6.1). They are therefore "soul-sisters"³¹. The point, as Plotinus expresses it, is a matter of analyticity: insofar as *homoiōsis theōi* denotes both a hierarchical relation and a moral ideal, it follows that object and subject of assimilation must be on different ontological levels. At this point, however, only one difference between them is relevant: while the World Soul, which is discarnate, is naturally and effortlessly turned to Intellect, human souls, who are subject to the temptations attendant upon embodiment, have to purify themselves and cultivate the virtues before being able to revert to their prior and become "intellectualised" (νοωθῆναι, VI 8 [39] 5.35) in the process. Plotinus concludes that Intellect, being both the ontological parent and the due source of aspiration for human souls, is the god to whom we are to make ourselves "like."

³⁰ Cf., for instance, I 6 [1] 5, IV 7 [2] 10 and V 1 [10] 1.

³¹ Cf., for instance, IV 3 [27] 6.1. For a fuller statement on the issue, cf. Helleman-Elgersma (1980:59-83).

If Plotinus' emanative ontology thus enabled him easily to settle a question left open in the *Theaetetus*, it raised several problems of its own, the first of which concerns the applicability of the concept of virtue to the Intelligible Principle. Plato, who shared with other ancient thinkers the assumption that an object of aspiration possesses to a high degree the property that lower beings aspire to, had made god, however he conceived it, the supreme bearer of the virtues. In this Plotinus did not follow him; Intellect, he pointed out, being immaterial, has no need of order or arrangement, hence of virtue (I 2 [19] 1.47-48). How indeed, he asked, would a divine being have occasion to exercise civic virtues like courage, when it has nothing to fear, or self-control, when it suffers from no lack and hence can have no desire? How, for that matter, would it need to practise even the higher, purificatory, virtues since virtues are "states" or "dispositions" (διαθέσεις, 3.19) of the soul, all of which can be acquired and lost and are therefore impermanent by nature? Virtue, Plotinus concluded, cannot be ascribed to the eternally perfect being from which Soul in all her manifestations is emanated.

If Intellect is beyond virtue, went Plotinus' next question, can it be said that "we are made like by our own virtues to that which does not possess virtue" (1.30-31)? To ground his positive answer to the question, Plotinus began by bringing in one of his favourite metaphors: "if something is made hot by the presence of fire," he asked rhetorically, "must fire itself be made hot by the presence of fire?" (1.33-35)³² Although the analogy is helpful in showing that a source need not possess the properties that it induces in its effects, it is misleading in one respect, as Plotinus himself recognised. From the fact that heat is an inherent (σύμφυτον, 1.36) property of fire and an extraneous (ἐπακτὸν, 1.37) property of that which is heated by fire, it cannot be inferred by analogy that virtue is "something extraneous to the soul but part of the nature of that from which the soul receives it by imitation" (1.37-38). Virtue is no more extraneous to the human soul become virtuous than it is inherent in Intellect.

To correct the analogy and explain how a virtuous soul can be "made like" a being that does not possess virtue, Plotinus turned to the logic of relations and drew a distinction between two kinds of likeness, one symmetrical, the other asymmetrical. Take the following example: of two buildings built according to the same architectural model (*paradeigma*), each is like the other since they are both similarly related to the model. A relation of symmetrical likeness, therefore, obtains between them. By contrast, the relation of likeness that obtains between the architectural model and each of the buildings modelled upon it is asymmetrical in so far as the model is ontologically "prior" (πρῶτον) to the

³² All quotations from the *Enneads* are in A.H. Armstrong's translation, with occasional modifications, flagged as such.

buildings erected in its likeness. It cannot, therefore, be said to be “reciprocally related to the thing [made] in its likeness and ... to be like it” (2.7-8). This latter kind of likeness, Plotinus concluded, is the one that obtains between a virtuous human soul and the divine Forms in Intellect, from which she draws her virtue:

“Likeness to good men is the likeness of two pictures of the same subject to each other; but likeness to the gods is likeness to the model (*paradeigma*), a being of a different kind to ourselves (7.28-31).”

Plotinus’ concern at this point appears to have been to avoid the “third man” *ad infinitum* regression discussed by Plato in the *Parmenides* (132a-b).³³ To that effect, he reiterates a point made earlier, namely that the *paradeigmata* in question, Intellect and the Forms, are situated at a higher ontological plane than the embodied souls and cannot for that reason be taken to be on par with them and made to fit into a common genus. Furthermore, Intellect, as a higher reality, has no need of the virtues that would enable lesser realities to succeed in their aspiration. In stressing the point Plotinus neatly sidestepped the conceptual difficulties generated by Socrates’ ascription of virtue to the divine. In using *paradeigma* as a semi-technical term to denote a pattern or Form in Intellect, he also avoided some of the difficulties that beset Plato’s use of the term in later dialogues.

To address the third question, which pertains to the way in which human souls draw their virtues from a reality that does not possess them, Plotinus brought in the concept of archetype (*ἀρχέτυπον*).³⁴ He argued that although Intellect does not possess the virtues, it has in itself archetypes of virtue such as “justice itself” (*αὐτοδικαιοσύνη*). Developing the point at the end of the tractate, he wrote:

“That which is There [in Intellect] is not virtue, that in the soul is virtue. What is it, then, There? Its inherent activity, what it really is; virtue is what comes from Thence and exists in another. For neither absolute justice nor any absolute is virtue, but a kind of exemplar; virtue is what is derived from it in the soul. Virtue is someone’s virtue; but the exemplar of each particular virtue in the Intellect belongs to itself, not to someone else” (trans. modified).³⁵

The conceptual point is finely drawn. Take justice as an example. At the level of the human soul, justice is a state (*diathesis*) to be cultivated and practised; admitting of degrees, it can increase or decrease and is always someone’s achievement. At the level of Intellect, by contrast, where it abides

³³ As already noted by Bréhier in his introductory notes to the tractate. In VI 1 [42] 2, Plotinus would spell out the principle in his own name, to show that there can be no common genus for intelligible and sensible substances.

³⁴ Plotinus uses both *paradeigma* and *archetypon* to refer to the Forms.

³⁵ 6.14-19: Κάκει μὲν οὐκ ἀρετή, ἐν δὲ ψυχῇ ἀρετή. Ἐκεῖ οὖν τί; Ἐνέργεια αὐτοῦ καὶ ὃ ἐστίν· ἐνταῦθα δὲ τὸ ἐν ἄλλῳ ἐκεῖθεν ἀρετή. Οὐδὲ γὰρ αὐτοδικαιοσύνη καὶ ἐκάστη ἀρετή, ἀλλ’ οἷον παράδειγμα· τὸ δὲ ἀπ’ αὐτῆς ἐν ψυχῇ ἀρετή. Τινὸς γὰρ ἢ ἀρετή· αὐτὸ δὲ ἕκαστον αὐτοῦ, οὐχὶ δὲ ἄλλου τινός.

as a living Form, justice itself is eternally what it is and what it thinks. As such, it constitutes the standard of reference for all kinds and manifestations of human justice; it is the transcendent and eternal norm whose traces are lodged in our soul, even when our busy life makes us unaware of them. The virtues, both purificatory and civic, as Plotinus conceived them, are dispositions of the soul that enable her, during the time of her embodiment, to strive to achieve likeness (*homoiōsis*) to the transcendent norms in Intellect. Both kinds of virtue, he held, have a specific role to play in the realisation of the soul's moral goal.

The virtues which Plotinus, in Plato's wake, called "purificatory" (καθάρσεις), to distinguish them from the lower or "civic" virtues (πολιτικά ἄρεταί),³⁶ have both a cognitive and a normative dimension. Their cognitive dimension lies in making the human soul aware of the presence in herself of traces of the Forms and thereby in leading her to the further realisation that her true good lies in "fellowship with that to which it is akin" (τὸ συνεῖναι τῷ συγγενεῖ, I 2 [19] 4.13-14).³⁷ Far from being pleonastic, the phrase is best interpreted as Plotinus' own formulation of the Platonic ideal of *homoiōsis theōi*, upon which it is a considerable improvement. Indeed, not only does Plotinus' formula avoid the problems involved in predicating virtue of the divine, but, more importantly, it also grounds the ideal in the nature of the embodied soul and points to the way in which the ideal is to be realised or, at least, asymptotically approached. Normatively, these virtues make the embodied soul aware that her commonality with Intellect is best actualised by leading a life in which the soul's lower, body-sustaining, elements are brought into line with her higher, intellective, element. By enabling the purified human soul to activate the traces of the Forms present in her, these virtues furnish her with the inner resources needed to identify, however sporadically, with the life and activity of Intellect:

"So the higher justice in the soul is its activity towards Intellect, its self-control is its inward turning to intellect, its courage is its freedom from affections, according to the likeness of that to which it looks which is free from affections by nature (6.24-26)."³⁸

An embodied soul that has been "intellectualised" (νοοθῆναι, VI 8 [39] 5.35) by the cultivation of the higher virtues is a soul who is at one with herself. Having distanced herself from the body and stripped away "everything that is alien to her higher nature," she is in a position to "draw herself together to itself in a sort of place of its own away from the body" (I 2 [19] 5.5-6) and to "act alone" (μόνη ἐνεργοῖ, 3.15). In presenting the Forms in Intellect as self-subsistent and absolute norms which the virtuous

³⁶ *Phaedo*, 68c-69a and 82a.

³⁷ This is a likely allusion to the *Timaeus* 90c6-d7.

³⁸ As L. Gerson (2013:297) wrote, "All true virtues are understood as advancements toward identification of the person with the activity of a disembodied intellect".

human soul can apprehend and to bring to bear on her life here below, Plotinus has formulated a version of moral realism that the Platonic Socrates had left implicit and undeveloped.³⁹

If Plotinus upheld Plato's hierarchy of civic and purificatory virtues, he did not follow him in depreciating the former as "simple-minded" and "unphilosophical."⁴⁰ Against the master, whose formulation of the distinction he found "unreasonable" (ἄλογον, 3.9-10), Plotinus argued that the civic virtues, far from being simple-minded, play a valuable role in the life of the embodied soul. Not only do they enable the soul to moderate potentially disruptive passions and desires, they also reflect, albeit more faintly than their higher manifestations, the realities of the intelligible world. The civic virtues, he wrote:

"... really set us in order and make us better by giving limit and measure to our desires, and generally by putting measure into the passions ... in so far as they are a measure which forms the matter of the soul, they are made like the measure There and have a trace of the Best There" (trans. modified).⁴¹

In Plotinus' outlook, therefore, the civic virtues exert their regulatory influence at the point at which the soul interacts with the body and the physical world. They curb the affections that originate in the bodily part of the compound and abolish false opinions and uncriticised mental images. As he would note in his next tractate (*On Dialectic*), "civic virtues apply reasoning to particular experiences and actions" (1.3 [20] 6.10), thereby enabling those who practise them to take the first step towards escaping from what Socrates had described as "the evils down here" (I.2 [19] 1.1-3). Speculating further, we may want to take the civic virtues, as Plotinus conceived them, to be the virtues of those ordinary men and women whom Socrates had left out of account in the *Theaetetus*, soldiers, artisans, labourers and all those who occupy the middle ground in the moral life and whose souls, too, carry within themselves reflections of eternally subsisting moral exemplars.

If Plotinus thus treated the interlude in the *Theaetetus* as a convenient point to anchor his concept of virtue, he also took it as a point of reference in his attempt to come to grips with the problem of evil. More specifically, Socrates' claim that "there must always be something opposed to the good (ὑπεναντίον γὰρ τι τῷ ἀγαθῷ, *Theaet.*, 176a6)" and his suggestion that a *paradeigma* of "evil and deepest unhappiness" is set up "in reality" (ἐν τῷ ὄντι, 176e3) led Plotinus to draw ethical implications

³⁹ As Burnyeat (1990:35-36) noted: "The idea of virtue as becoming like God so far as one can (176b) was taken up as a common theme among philosophers of quite different persuasions.' Plotinus, Burnyeat continues, was one philosopher whom the digression stirred "to really serious reflection on what it is worthwhile and important to know."

⁴⁰ *Phaedo*, 68e5 and 82b2-3, respectively.

⁴¹ 2.14-20: ... κατακοσμοῦσι μὲν ὄντως καὶ ἀμείνους ποιοῦσιν ὀρίζουσαι καὶ μετροῦσαι τὰς ἐπιθυμίας καὶ ὅλως τὰ πάθη μετροῦσαι ... ἣ μέτρα γε ἐν ὕλῃ τῇ ψυχῇ, ὁμοίωται τῷ ἐκεῖ μέτρῳ καὶ ἔχουσιν ἴχνος τοῦ ἐκεῖ ἀρίστου.

from his conception of matter as an ontological necessity, which, as such, constitutes an ever-present threat to the integrity of the embodied human soul. As will now be seen, these ethical implications turned out to be one of the most intractable aspects of the philosophy of the *Enneads*.

b. Matter as Bedrock of Evil: *Ennead* II 4 12 (*On Matter*) and I 8 [51] (*On What are and When Come Evils*)

The issue was thorny. First, it involved Plotinus in a balancing act: could he, at one and the same time, theorise evil as a principle of negativity opposed to the good while avoiding the dualistic consequences entailed by the presence of seemingly antagonistic principles at the heart of his system? Second, if Plotinus could arguably succeed in sidestepping the risk of dualism by invoking the principle of diminution built into his concept of emanation, did he do so at the cost of making the δύναμις πάντων, the One/Good, the (indirect) source of evil? In the following pages I shall address the first question with a view to establishing the extent to which Plotinus conceived of evil as an ever-present force of negativity in the world of sense.

As a preliminary step to substantiating Socrates' claim that "evils must exist of necessity, since the good must have its contrary" (I 8 [51] 6.14-17), Plotinus argued that, *pace* Aristotle, substances can have contraries:

"... things which are altogether separate, and have nothing in common, and are as far apart as they can be, are contrary in their very nature: for their contrariety does not depend on quality or any other category of being, but on their furthest possible separation from each other, and on their being made up of opposites and on their contrary action (6.54-7)."

In good and evil, Plotinus claimed, we hold the extreme form of contrariety.⁴² Contrariety is inherent to the pair since "all the things which are included in each nature are contrary to those in the other": while the divine nature has substantial reality, true being and absolute goodness, evil lacks both substantial reality and true being (6.44-47). Notwithstanding the lack he had inscribed in the nature of evil, Plotinus presented the contrariety between good and evil as necessary; as there is an absolute good, he claimed, there must also be an absolute evil.

⁴² Good and evil, he wrote, are "more contrary (μᾶλλον ἐναντία) to each other than are the other contraries" (6.35).

Had Plotinus, in his zeal on Socrates' behalf, let dualism in through the back door? Aware of the risk, he relied on two arguments to ward it off. As seen above, the first argument had him pointing out that contrariety, as he had defined it, need not entail parity of ontological status, and that it does not do so in the case of good and evil. In the second argument he appealed to the principle of diminishing emanative power and argued that since each stage of emanation represents a weakening of dynamism relatively to the previous one, it is inevitable that the process which starts from the One should terminate in a point of "absolute indefiniteness" (ἀοριστίαν εἶναι παντελῆ, III 4 [15] 1.11-2), which he proceeded to identify with matter:

"... it is necessary that what comes after the First should exist, and therefore that the Last should exist; and this is matter, which possesses nothing at all of the Good. And in this way too evil is necessary."⁴³

As conceptualised in those lines, matter, the contrary of the One, necessarily follows from it through the intermediary of Intellect and Soul.⁴⁴ Abject residue of the emanative process, it possesses nothing of the One or Good and, as such, is primal evil (κακὸν εἶναι πρῶτον, I 8 [51] 3.39) or evil itself (κακὸν τὸ ... αὐτό, 8.24). Although Plotinus does not treat matter and evil as synonymous, he regards them as co-extensive. From his viewpoint, matter/evil is first and foremost a metaphysical presence, and it is from its metaphysical status that it derives its ethical significance. As matter is the necessary substrate of the world of sense in general and sentient bodies in particular, it presents the embodied human soul with occasions for being false to her true nature and falling into vice by conceding excessively to the body. Matter, in short, is the bedrock from which springs the evil that human beings commit. To qualify as moral evil, however, the evil that human beings commit must, in some way, be within their control. Mindful of the conceptual relation between responsibility and evil-doing in the moral sense, Plotinus taught that not all human souls fall prey to the same extent to the temptations and obstacles that embodiment places in their way; some rare souls, he held, even succeed in remaining unsullied throughout the duration of their life in the flesh.⁴⁵ In contrast with metaphysical evil, which is necessary, moral evil, therefore, although supervenient upon it, is contingent. As will be shown

⁴³ I 8 [51] 7.21-23: Ἐξ ἀνάγκης δὲ εἶναι τὸ μετὰ τὸ πρῶτον, ὥστε καὶ τὸ ἔσχατον· τοῦτο δὲ ἡ ὕλη μηδὲν ἔτι ἔχουσα αὐτοῦ. Καὶ αὕτη ἡ ἀνάγκη τοῦ κακοῦ.

⁴⁴ The above description of the generation of matter as the last stage of emanation commits me to a version of Plotinus' philosophy known as "*emanation intégrale*," according to which matter is generated by soul at the end of her descent and, therefore, that matter "... follows of necessity from causes prior to itself" (O'Brien 1981:119). That interpretation, first put forward and vigorously defended by O'Brien in numerous publications (1971, 1981, 1991, 1993, 1996, 1999 and 2014), is now accepted by many scholars working in the field. Unsurprisingly in view of the difficulty of the topic and the obscurity of Plotinus' various treatments of it, there have been dissenting voices and the debate remains lively to the present day.

⁴⁵ While there are rare souls who remain pure throughout their embodiment ("The perfect soul, then, which directs itself to Intellect is always pure and turns away from matter and neither sees nor approaches anything undefined and unmeasured and evil" I 8 [51] 4.25-27), others, who indiscriminately defer to their conjoined body, are driven to the extreme of wickedness. Most human souls, as Plotinus knew well, situate themselves between these two extremes. On this issue, cf. also IV 8 (6) 5 and 7 and I 8 [51] 5.29-30.

below, the distinction between metaphysical and moral evil, upon which much of Plotinus' ethics depends, highlights his commitment to what modern moral philosophers call moral realism.

As thus theorised, Plotinus' metaphysical concept of evil is open to a number of objections, of which the most obvious is "why is evil *qua* evil necessary?" Since it is a matter of definition that the emanative process involves a progressive diminution of goodness, an objector might point out that its end point would more naturally be conceived as absence of goodness than absolute evil.⁴⁶ To counter the objection, which he had anticipated (I 8 [51] 7.1), Plotinus proceeded to argue that matter/evil is the *sine qua non* condition of the existence of the world of sense. In a transparent allusion to the role of the receptacle in Plato's *Timaeus*, he claimed that since our world is "composed of contrary principles," it "would not exist at all if matter did not exist (οὐδ' ἂν εἴη μὴ ὕλης οὐσης, 7.3-4)". For this reason, he argued, there must be something:

"... which underlies figures and forms and shapes and measures and limits, decked out with the adornment which belongs to something else, having no good of its own, only a shadow in comparison with real being, [that] is the substance of evil (if there really can be a substance of evil); this is what our argument discovers to be the primal evil, absolute evil."⁴⁷

Matter/evil, we are told in those lines, is the substrate which Soul produces at the last stage of her descent and covers with forms, shapes, measures and limits to give the resulting physical world a semblance of reality and beauty. The detail of the process is described in an early tractate, III 9 [13] (*Various Considerations*), to which we now turn.

As her emanative capacity weakens, Plotinus explains, the descending soul goes "towards non-existence" (εἰς τὸ μὴ ὄν, 3.9), as if "walking on emptiness" (κενεμβατοῦσα, 3.11). Intently focusing her attention upon herself (πρὸς αὐτὴν γὰρ βουλομένη, 3.10), she makes an image of herself, an image that is indefinite and altogether dark, "without reason and mindless" (ἄλογον γὰρ καὶ ἀνόητον, 3.13), and, as such, as far removed from reality as can be. The image is matter. Then, in a second endeavour (δευτέρᾳ προσβολῇ, 3.15),⁴⁸ Plotinus continued, the soul "looks at the image again, as it were (οἷον) directing its attention to it a second time" and covers it with such images of the Forms

⁴⁶ For an ancient objector, as presented by Plotinus, see I 8 [51] 11; for a modern objector, Opsomer (2007:168 sqq).

⁴⁷ 3.35-40: Τὴν δ' ὑποκειμένην σχήμασι καὶ εἶδεσι καὶ μορφαῖς καὶ μέτροις καὶ πέρασι καὶ ἄλλοτρίῳ κόσμῳ κοσμουμένην, μηδὲν παρ' αὐτῆς ἀγαθὸν ἔχουσαν, εἰδωλὸν δὲ ὡς πρὸς τὰ ὄντα, κακοῦ δὴ οὐσίαν, εἰ τις καὶ δύναται κακοῦ οὐσία εἶναι, ταύτην ἀνευρίσκει ὁ λόγος κακὸν εἶναι πρῶτον καὶ καθ' αὐτὸ κακόν. Cf. also II 4 [12] 16.

⁴⁸ It goes without saying that the two moments or stages are ontological, not temporal. Plotinus' use of the qualifier *hoion* on III 9 [13] 3.15 shows that he was aware of the difficulties involved in using temporal language to describe a process that is a-temporal.

(ἐμύρφωσε, 3.16) as she can still muster at that stage. The soul animates the image by “going into it” and “rejoicing” at the association (3.15-16). As Plotinus wrote in a near contemporary tractate, III 4 9 [15] (*On Our Allotted Guardian Spirit*), the resulting compound of soul and body is “the last representative of the powers above in the last depth of the world below” (1.14-15). From the description of the embodied human soul as a representative of the powers above, we may infer that, although weaker than her sister-souls higher up in the scale of being, this lower grade of soul nonetheless retains from her high lineage sufficient inner resources to detach herself from her conjoined body and to revert to her prior. As Socrates had said, she can “fly from here.” Not all human souls, however, as Plotinus knew well, have the same powers of conversion or use them to the same extent.⁴⁹ In the course of their embodied life, many let themselves be caught up in the needs and wants of the body that they had eagerly joined. These are the fallen souls, who have let themselves be taken in by the apparent charm of the world of sense and have mistakenly taken for reality what is only an image adorned. As Plotinus would explain in his last tractate on matter, I 8 [51]:

“Matter darkens the illumination, the light from that source, by mixture with itself, and weakens it by itself offering it the opportunity for generation and the reason for coming to matter; for *it would not have come to what was not present* (τῷ μὴ παρόντι). This is the fall of the soul, to come in this way to matter and to become weak, because all its powers do not come into action; matter hinders them from coming by occupying the place which soul holds and ... making evil what it has got hold of by a sort of theft – until soul manages to escape back to its higher state” (I 8 [51] 14. 40-49).

Whether or not they would succeed in convincing the objector, these lines show that Plotinus conceived of matter, not only as an absence of goodness, but also as a adverse presence in the world of sense. Through the body, to the formation of which it “makes the greatest contribution” (II 4 [12] 12.1), matter can divert the embodied soul’s attention from her true nature and destiny. As such, matter is the ethical challenge that human souls are to face.

The problem for Plotinus’ readers at this stage is to understand how matter, which he consistently characterises as “absolute indefinitiveness,” can exert a corrupting influence upon the human soul. Perplexing also is the stress that he places on the ontological indigence of matter when he describes it as lifeless, formless, ugly, limitless, impassible, unmeasured, indeterminate, sterile and altogether without quality (ἄποιος),⁵⁰ adding, seemingly for good measure, that “the evil nature has a false being.” (I 8 [51] 6.44). What can matter be if it is destitute of all qualities and deprived of true being? Matter,

⁴⁹ Cf. footnote 47 above.

⁵⁰ *Apoios*: III 4 [15] 1 and IV 7 3 8; unmeasured: I 8 3 12-16; I 8 [51] 3; II 4 [12] 16, 19-27; formless (δυσσειδές): III 9 3. In Corrigan’s word (2005:111): “Matter, for Plotinus, is a “principle” of potentiality that is capable of receiving forms only by not having a form itself.” For a fuller outline of Plotinus’ argument, cf. II 4 [12] 12-15 and Perdikouri’s 2014 *ad loc.* comment.

Plotinus wrote in one of his most striking phrases, is “absolute otherness” (αὐτοετερότης, 5.8 and III 6 [36] 8) in the sense that “its relationship to other things is to be other than they;” while they have being, form, determinacy and qualities, matter is “absolutely deficient” (παντελῶς ἐλλείπη, 5.8) in the sense of being inaccessible to the operation of the formative principles.⁵¹ From the plethora of negative epithets that Plotinus predicates of matter, it is not to be inferred, however, that he did not conceive it as possessed of disruptive potential. Nothing could be further from the truth. To avoid being misunderstood on an issue that turns out to have crucial ethical significance, Plotinus introduced a distinction between relative or localised evils, such as illness or injustice, and the absolute evil (παντελὴς τὸ κακόν, 5.13) of matter, which is incapable of carrying any trace whatsoever of goodness. It is as absolute evil that matter, as conceived by Plotinus, infects whatever participates in it, down to the formative forces (λόγοι ἔνυλοι, 8.15) that the descending soul projects upon it:

“... the forms in matter are not the same as they would be if they were by themselves; they are formative forces immanent in matter, corrupted in matter and infected with its nature. Essential fire does not burn, nor do any other forms existing by themselves do what they are said to do when they come to exist in matter. For matter masters what is imaged in it and corrupts and destroys it by applying its own nature which is contrary to form... till it has made the form belong to matter and no longer to itself.”⁵²

As these lines make clear, Plotinian matter, for all its ontological deficiency, is nonetheless possessed of a power to de-nature whatever is in contact with it.

The corrupting influence that Plotinus ascribes to matter shows that, far from conceding to his opponents that evil is but a privation of goodness, he held it to be an ever-present force in the world of sense. Matter, he emphatically declared, is “no empty name” (οὐ κενὸν ὄνομα, 12.22) and should not be thought of as “nothing at all” (16.3). The point is made time and again in his last tractate on matter (I 8 [51]), which arguably contains his final and best thoughts on the subject. Unless evil “were something itself first” (δεῖ τι πρότερον αὐτὸ εἶναι, 3.22), he there argues, it could not corrupt whatever mixes with it. In the same way as measuredness, as a feature of things that are measured, presupposes an independent principle of measure and unmeasuredness, as a feature of things that are

⁵¹ 5.8 and III 6 [36] 8.

⁵² 1.8. [51] 8.13-24: τὰ ἐν τῇ ὕλῃ εἶδη οὐ ταῦτά ἐστιν, ἅπερ ἦν, εἰ ἐφ’ αὐτῶν ὑπῆρχεν, ἀλλὰ λόγοι ἔνυλοι φθαρέντες ἐν ὕλῃ καὶ τῆς φύσεως τῆς ἐκείνης ἀναπλησθέντες· οὐδὲ γὰρ τὸ πῦρ αὐτὸ καίει οὐδὲ ἄλλο τι τῶν ἐφ’ αὐτῶν ταῦτα ἐργάζεται, ἀ ἐν τῇ ὕλῃ γενόμενα λέγεται ποιεῖν. Γενομένη γὰρ κυρία τοῦ εἰς αὐτὴν ἐμφαντασθέντος φθείρει αὐτὸ καὶ διόλλυσι τὴν αὐτῆς παραθεῖσα φύσιν ἐναντίαν οὖσαν ... ἕως ἂν αὐτὸ ποιήσῃ αὐτῆς, ἀλλὰ μὴ αὐτοῦ ἔτι εἶναι. The corrupting influence of matter on whatever is imaged on it accounts for the fact that everything in the physical cosmos has “a certain irrational power” (*dynamis alogon*, IV 4 [28] 37.12). As Gurtler (2015:170) explains: ‘The irrationality of matter allows forms to appear in it [the physical cosmos], but these forms become distinguished in time and space by this contact, becoming the bodies that inhabit this cosmos. Their association with matter ... gives them ‘a certain irrational power.’”

unmeasured, presupposes an independent principle of unmeasure, so the presence of evil beings and things in our world presupposes the existence of an independent and pre-existing principle of evil.⁵³ “If anyone says that matter does not exist,” he notes sternly, “he must be shown the necessity of its existence from our discussions about matter.” (15.1-3)⁵⁴ To underscore the status of matter as an existent, he did not hesitate to extend the normal semantic range of key concepts. He described matter as an essence (*ousia*, 3.17) and, somewhat hesitantly, labelled it a hypostasis (ὑποστάσει, 3.20) before finally calling it a “nature,” albeit one that is “contrary to form (φύσιν ἐναντίαν οὔσαν, 8.20). A few pages later, he took care to stress that it would be wrong to say that it has “no nature at all” (μηδεμίαν φύσιν, 10.4).

To dispel the paradox involved in both denying and ascribing a nature to matter, Plotinus turned to the distinction between absolute and relative non-being that Plato had introduced in the *Sophist* in order to show that being and non-being can blend in so far as they partake of the nature of the different (258 d-e). The distinction served Plotinus’ purpose well since it enabled him to show that non-being and non-existence are not synonymous and to argue that although matter is non-being, it is not, for all that, non-existent. “Is matter, then, the same thing as otherness?” he asked in his first tractate on matter. “No,” came his reply, “it is the same thing as the part of otherness which is *opposed* to the things which in the full and proper sense exist, that is to say Forms.”⁵⁵ Rather than being simply “other than” substantial beings or Forms, matter is “opposed to” them or, to recall Socrates’ word in the *Theaetetus*, “contrary (*hynantion*)” to them as well as to virtue (I 8 [52] 6 *passim*). Being inaccessible to the influence of the formative principles (III 6 [26] 7), matter cannot be transformed into something other than non-being or privation (στέρησις). But, comes the all-important qualification, this does not mean that matter does not exist. On the contrary, it constitutes a *sine qua non* condition of the generation of the physical cosmos and the completion of the emanative process. The distinction between non-being and non-existence, therefore, enabled Plotinus to conclude that “although matter is non-being, it is in this way something.”⁵⁶

Impossibly paradoxical though Plotinus’ characterisation of matter may strike the modern reader, it had the merit of enabling him to make three points of crucial importance to his ontology. First, in ascribing relative non-being to matter, he avoided making good and evil antagonistic forces of equal ontological status. Second, in giving matter a presence and a role in the world of sense, he distanced

⁵³ II 4 [12] 12 *passim*.

⁵⁴ Εἰ δέ τις τὴν ὕλην μὴ φησιν εἶναι, δεικτέον αὐτῷ ἐκ τῶν περὶ ὕλης λόγων τὴν ἀνάγκην τῆς ὑποστάσεως αὐτῆς. In Emilsson’s words (2017:194), “If the arguments for there being such an ultimate receptacle of forms hold, such a thing as matter must exist even if there is nothing that it is”.

⁵⁵ (II 4 [12] 16.1-3): Ἄρ’ οὖν καὶ ἐτερότητι ταυτόν; Ἡ οὐ, ἀλλὰ μορίῳ ἐτερότητος ἀντιταπτομένῳ πρὸς τὰ ὄντα κυρίως, ἃ δὲ λόγοι, trans. modified). For *logos* as Form, cf. Sleeman and Pollet (1980, s.v. c).

⁵⁶ Διὸ καὶ μὴ ὄν οὕτω τι ὄν καὶ στερήσει ταυτόν (16.3, trans. modified). I am here indebted to O’Brien (1996).

himself from a conception that was common in his time, namely that evil is nothing more than an absence of goodness. So doing, he provided philosophical backing for the view, which had been left unjustified in the *Theaetetus*, that there is a *paradeigma* of evil *en tōi onti*. Although Plotinus did not call matter/evil a *paradeigma* since he reserved the term for the Forms in Intellect, all of which are substantial beings and therefore possessed of goodness by definition, he nonetheless presented matter as a necessary presence in the physical cosmos emanated from the higher principles. Third, in conceiving matter as the eternally present substrate of the world of sense, he substantiated the view, which had also been left unjustified in the *Theaetetus*, that evil would forever haunt, or hover over (*peripolei*), mortal nature.

Plotinus' use of the Platonic metaphor is significant: "to haunt" and "to hover," which are the standard renderings of περιπολεῖν, both suggest the presence of a threat or an impending harm of a serious nature. More relevantly to the present argument, the metaphor suggests that the threat may be resisted, and the impending harm never come to pass. As such, it admirably suited Plotinus' purpose since he held that for this particular threat to become effective, the soul must let it be so. Moral evil, in other words, arises from the conjunction of two factors, the alluring effect of matter upon the embodied soul and the weakness of the embodied soul. Just as the shape of the axe cannot cut without the iron, Plotinus argued, the soul cannot be corrupted in the absence of matter and the occasions for weakness that it presents her with. Be it noted, however, that it is not the soul *qua* soul, or even *qua* embodied, that matter can tempt away from her true goal and destiny, but only "the kind of soul" (ψυχὴ ἡ τῷ αὐτῷ) that "is not outside matter or by itself." (I 8 [51] 4.14-15) As seen in section IIIa above, such a soul falls short of the ideal; having failed to "draw herself together in a sort of place of her own, away from the body," it cannot "act alone." (I 2 [19] 5.4-6) and 3.15) Impossibly austere as this ideal might seem, it is even so, as Plotinus repeatedly claimed, within the capabilities of the embodied soul once she has stripped away everything that is alien to her higher nature and thus successfully reversed the self-forgetfulness induced by too close an association with body.⁵⁷ Plotinus' diagnosis and suggested treatment of the soul's self-forgetfulness, it will now be argued, shows the extent to which his ethics is driven by his ontology.

Take, to begin with, his choice of metaphors to highlight the harm that individual human souls bring upon themselves by conceding indiscriminately and excessively to the demands of the body.⁵⁸ In tractate I 6 [1] (*On Beauty*), the impure soul is described as "having a great deal of bodily stuff mixed into it," stuff that is comparable to "mire and mud (τοῦ πηλοῦ ἢ βορβόρου, 5.41-44)."⁵⁹ In tractate IV 8 [6] (*On the Descent of Souls into Bodies*), the vocabulary of presence is consistently used to

⁵⁷ The whole argument of V 1 [10] is designed to offer philosophical therapy to self-forgetful souls.

⁵⁸ See II 4 [12] 12.1: "Matter, then, makes the greatest contribution to body." See also I 8 [51] 4: "the body directly participates in matter."

⁵⁹ See also I 8 [51] 13.17.

describe the relation between soul and matter⁶⁰ and to castigate souls who, having neglected to purify themselves, cannot stand “apart” from the physical nature and become trapped “in the fetters of the body” (ἐν δεσμοῖς τοῖς τοῦ σώματος, 4.22-23). In tractate I 8 [51] (*On what are Evils*), we read that “to sink in matter and be filled with it” (ἐν ὕλῃ ἐστὶ καταδύναι καὶ πλησθῆναι αὐτῆς, 13.22-23) is tantamount to kill the soul in oneself. In a later chapter of the same tractate, the weakness of fallen souls is ascribed to “the presence of something alien, like the presence of phlegm or bile (ἀλλοτρίου παρουσία, ὥσπερ φλέγματος ἢ χολῆς) in the body” (14.22), fluids that are then assimilated to matter. Lastly, in the concluding chapter of that tractate, the language of presence is replaced by the stronger terminology of physical contact: “What soul would have it [evil] if it did not come into contact (ἐφαναμένη) with a lower nature?” (1.8.15.13-14)⁶¹ Plotinus’ use of these metaphors shows that he holds that a soul who “comes into contact with a lower nature”⁶² and becomes subservient to the demands of body alienates herself from her true nature.⁶³ Taken alongside his account of the soul *qua* soul as a reality pure of evil, the metaphors also confirm that he regarded matter as the sole external cause of human evil. They lend rhetorical emphasis to his rejoinder to those critics who would account for moral evil solely by human ignorance, false opinions, corrupt desires or unhealthy bodily states.

Plotinus’ own explanation of the origin and nature of evil, it can now be concluded, was bolder and more robust than the “absence” theory defended by his critics. He made evil a negative value coterminous with matter, which he had theorised as a necessary prerequisite to the completion of the work of soul in the world of sense. No mere abstraction, Plotinian matter/evil exists as an ontological presence independent of human wishes, desires and emotions. Even though he did not call it a *paradeigma* or located it *en tōi onti*, as Socrates had at one point tentatively done, Plotinus presented it as an objective presence in the world inhabited by individual human souls and a constituent part of their embodied self. For these reasons, we may conclude, Plotinus’ conception of evil has features in common with moral realism in the sense in which modern philosophers understand the classificatory phrase.

Since moral realism, as generally understood, makes the grounds of moral value accessible to human cognition, the question must be addressed as to whether this is so of Plotinus’ conception of evil as a presence in the physical cosmos. As evident in his first tractate on matter, Plotinus was aware of

⁶⁰ As Laurent Lavaud (Brisson/Pradeau, 2010:100, n.217) justly remarks, the vocabulary of presence is not to be taken literally here since neither soul nor matter can, strictly speaking, be said to be localised in place.

⁶¹ This recalls the warning already issued in 7.14: “someone who lives united to the body is also united to matter.”

⁶² 15,13-14: Ἡ τίνι ἂν μὴ ἐφαναμένη τῆς φύσεως τῆς χειρόνης;

⁶³ As Plotinus famously puts the point in the opening lines of tractate V 1 [10] 1.1-3: “What is it, then, which has made the souls forget their father, God, and be ignorant of themselves and him, even though they are parts which come from the higher world and altogether belong to it?”

the difficulty of the question. In tractate IV 8 [6] (*On the Descent of the Soul into Bodies*), he had argued, not only that knowledge (γνώσις) of evil is possible, but also that it may even be of use to the knower on the ground that “the experience of evil amounts to a clearer understanding of good” (7.15). He became more guarded later. In the two tractates on matter, having deferred to the Empedoclean principle that “like is known by like,” he puzzled over the question whether what has neither form nor quality nor true being can be conceived and known.⁶⁴ In II 4 10.1-2, he asked: “What will you conceive anything whatever without quality to be?” (Τί δὲ νοήσεις ἄποιον ὁπωσοῦν;) In I 8 [51] 9.5-8, he tentatively replied that it can be known, albeit indirectly, through a process of reasoning by elimination: “We do not see absolute wickedness, because it is unbounded; we know it by removal (ἀφαιρέσει), as what is in no way virtue; but we know vice which is not absolute by its falling short of virtue.” Equating formlessness with matter, he then concluded that it is to be apprehended in the process of taking away all form (9.15-17).

Combined with the principle of similarity between knower and known, Plotinus’ instruction for apprehending vice and/or evil leads to the paradoxical conclusion that in apprehending what is formless by definition, we apprehend formlessness in ourselves. How can that be, Plotinus’ reader wonders since formlessness is alien to the soul *qua* soul? Just as we cannot see darkness by bringing light to it and do not see anything unless we bring light to it, Plotinus replied, so the reasoning soul must, “as it were (*hoion*),” come “to what is not its own” and “by not bringing its own light with it, experience something contrary to itself, that it may see its own contrary” (9.22-26). What the reasoning soul sees at the conclusion of the required process of elimination, Plotinus had already concluded in II 4 [12] 10.30-31, is “a dim thing dimly and a dark thing darkly, and it thinks it without thinking (τοῦτο νοεῖ ἀμυδρῶς ἀμυδρὸν καὶ σκοτεινῶς σκοτεινὸν καὶ νοεῖ οὐ νοοῦσα). As suggested by the deliberate conceptual fuzziness of the formula, Plotinus knew that this was not really an explanation; even so, the fact remains that he had committed himself to the view that evil/matter, source of all negative values, is a possible object of a degree of cognitive apprehension on the part of the embodied soul.

As a brief return to the argument of IIIa will now confirm, the realist character of Plotinus’ concept of moral goodness is more explicit than that of moral evil. His contention that the human soul has sufficient inner resources to overcome the lure of the physical nature presupposes that he holds her to be capable of the degree of freedom required to elevate herself to her emanating principle. Although her inner resources to do so may have become dormant through lack of use, they can never entirely disappear since “in spite of everything, it [the soul] always possesses something transcendent (ὑπερέχον τι, IV 8 [6] 4.30-31.),” which enables her to “raise herself and somehow manage to look away from the

⁶⁴ II 4 [12] 10.3-5 and I 8 [51] 9.14.

mud.”⁶⁵ A soul made pure by the practice of the higher virtues is a soul who, keeping as far apart from the body as possible, is turned to Intellect and the Forms and is able, as result, directly to apprehend the *paradeigmata* of virtue which, in turn, keep alive her aspiration to self-perfection and god-likeness. Plotinus’ terse formulation - “we know virtue by our own very intellect and power of thought; virtue knows itself” (trans. modified)⁶⁶ - shows that, in his view, the best life for human beings to lead is one in which virtue reflects knowledge of the realities *en tōi ontī*. An amphibious reality, the human embodied soul lives her life situating herself between two contrary principles, both existent and both necessary. The choice is hers, either “to fly from here,” and, through the practice of the higher virtues, approach the ideal of god-likeness or, stagnating in the cesspool of matter, lose touch with the highest part of her being. Or, indeed, honourably enough, the embodied soul may rest content to live the “in between” practical life of action through the cultivation of the civic virtues.

Conclusion

The interlude in the *Theaetetus*, to judge by the frequency with which it is alluded to in the *Enneads*, was one of Plotinus’ favourite Platonic passages. More specifically, the ideal of god-likeness, as eloquently expressed by Socrates, provided Plotinus with an anchor point for his ethics. However, as he realised, the interlude, for all its eloquence, left loose threads and unanswered questions. To those, he brought the resources of his complex ontology. Socrates’ god, once de-mythologised, became the hypostasis Intellect, whose Forms are archetypes of virtues as opposed to actual virtues. The “place” that we must leave behind in order to reach out to the divine is our body-dependent self. As for the knowledge that we must gain in order to do so, it comes through a process of self-purification that enables those engaged in it to reach the higher degree of virtue. Since, as Plotinus knew, embodied human souls have differing moral capacities, he reformulated the Platonic distinction between civic and purificatory virtues to make a level of true virtue accessible to the many.

By far the biggest question left open in the interlude concerned the ground of moral value and the objectivity of moral norms. While Plato had vested goodness in the divine, he had left the nature of evil an open issue, at one point confining it to mortal nature, at another describing it as a paradigm set up in reality. Plotinus’ solution to the problem of evil was innovative. He assimilated evil to matter, which he described as a necessary but disruptive factor in the physical universe. Evil, as he taught, is the alien element which the self-purifying soul must overcome if it is to make itself, so far as it can, “like” the divine higher realities. Neither mere absence nor otherworldly paradigm, Plotinian matter is the hypostasised negative presence that accounts for the imperfections of the physical nature and the

⁶⁵ I 8 [51] 13. 24-25. As Lavaud helpfully puts the point in an *ad loc.* comment, Plotinus here means the death of the soul to be ethical rather than bodily.

⁶⁶ I 8 [51] 9. 2-3: Ἀρετὴν μὲν γὰρ νῶν αὐτῷ καὶ φρονήσει· αὐτὴν γὰρ γνωρίζει.

fallibility of the human soul. In ascribing relative non-being, existence and a “nature” to matter and its concomitant, evil, Plotinus introduced into Greek philosophy a conception that had been largely alien to it until then. From the *Enneads* onwards, the concept of evil, as well as the ideal of god-likeness, were ready for a further transformation at the hands of the Church Fathers.⁶⁷

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